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Review of: Real Talk. Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action

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Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (Eds), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, 296 pp., ISBN 978-0-230-36871-2, £74, EUR 100, USD 88 (hardback; paperback available).

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The collection on *Real Talk. Reality Television and Discourse Analysis in Action*, edited by Nuria Lorenzo-Dus and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, is divided into three parts containing 12 chapters in total and offers insights into the study of identity construction, (im)politeness and genre by studying and comparing reality TV shows in different countries.

After a brief introduction, the first part of the book (Chapters 1 and 2) entitled “the reality of discourse and discourse analysis: theory, approaches, practices” positions the object of study. Chapter 1 by editors Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus on “the discourse of reality television” shows that the studies are inspired by a discourse analytic approach, although the different authors draw on a number of frameworks, “from multimodality and interactional sociolinguistics to Critical Discourse Analysis” (p. 9). The editors explain that there is no unified definition of Reality Television (RTV), which contains broadcasts as diverse as “makeover shows, dating shows, talent shows, gamedocs, docudrama” (p. 15; e.g. *Big Brother* or the *Idol* franchise). They argue that it is preferable to discuss the shows as discourse rather than genre, due to the fact that RTV shows have developed into different genres themselves and show a great degree of hybridity (pp. 11, 14). However, the shows share “the overarching goal of entertaining the audience, and different move structures which are, in turn, realized by different sets of rhetorical strategies” (p. 15). While clearly also containing scripted interaction and targeting a TV audience, the RTV shows all have in common that lay/ordinary people interact/compete in the shows (p. 15). The editors argue that RTV shows provide excellent

data for the study of identity construction due to the frequent display of raw emotions and “‘spectacular impoliteness’, that is, impoliteness as spectacle in reality programmes (Lorenzo-Dus, 2009b)”. The editors thus call for giving more attention to this data and argue that the collection offers new insights into this as of yet under-researched context. In Chapter 2 entitled “discourse analysis approaches to the study of reality television”, Lorenzo-Dus and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich further explore the concepts of identity and aggression, which are so typical of RTV shows, and discuss a series of interesting methodological observations.

While Part 1 sets the scene for the collection from a theoretical and methodological point of view, Part 2 contains five empirical studies on RTV shows that draw on the concept of ‘identity’. Chris Shei works on a Chinese dating show in his contribution “how ‘real’ is reality television in China? On the success of a Chinese dating programme”. The comparison of the UK show *Take Me Out* with the Chinese adaptation *Feichengwura* reveals cultural differences in the understanding of the two shows. Shei reveals underlying ideologies of light-heartedness and fun in the UK version. In contrast, in the Chinese variant the show allows candidates to look for life-long partners. Shei discusses how the Chinese show’s format is adapted as a consequence and how the candidates’ behaviour aims at projecting seriousness and respect towards the potential partners. In Chapter 4, Michal Hamo explores an Israeli reality race game show. She studies “the (inter)play of nationality, religiosity and gender: Textual mechanisms for the rich representation of Israeli identity”. Her critical discussion reveals how the casting of the show, in which secular and religious candidates are paired, results in discussions of national identity and social differences based primarily on inter-Jewish religious differences. At the same time, while the show is “intentionally designed to promote pluralism, tolerance and discussions of Jewish-Israeli identity” (p. 71), she reveals how Israeli identity is often constructed in stereotypical ways, simplifying Jewish identity to religious identity as well as erasing Arab-Israelis. In Chapter 5, Monika Bednarek offers “a multimodal perspective on language, emotion and identity” by presenting qualitative discussions of two extracts from the Australian cooking show *MasterChef*. She thereby pays particular attention to the display of emotion. While emotional display in RTV shows is often negative, the cooking show explicitly aims at being uplifting and supportive. Bednarek looks at how this emotionality is foregrounded in order to “[develop] an affective connection to viewers, making them engage emotionally” (p. 102) and how the expression of both positive and negative emotions is linked to “emotional personae or identities that are being choreographed, or manufactured, commodified and broadcast publicly” (p. 107). In Chapter 6, Laura Pardo presents an analysis of “the aesthetics of poverty and crime in Argentinean reality television”. The show is a docudrama that follows members of the Argentinian police in their work. In an analysis of one extract (from her larger corpus) Pardo shows how the show combines reality and fiction to “re-present the plight of certain poor and marginal groups in ways that clearly link them to crime, and hence construct their identities as ‘criminals’” (p. 118) and how this might as a result “lead to inspiring fear and prejudice in the audience” (p. 129). The second part is concluded with

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a chapter by Philippa Smith on “heroic endeavours: flying high in New Zealand reality television”, where she looks at the staging and narrative of a show which accompanies professional helicopter rescue teams on their missions. Through detailed analysis of one show that interweaves three emergency stories, Smith nicely demonstrates how the show’s careful editing process serves to create a heroic narrative of the rescuers and construct nation-building ideologies, which, at the same time, also serve the show’s explicit aim to induce viewers to donate money to the rescuing service.

The third part of the collection gives centre stage to aggression. The authors of the five empirical studies focus on faceaggravating behaviour directed towards the (primarily) ordinary members/candidates of the shows. Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 both deal in a comparative manner with the US and UK talent shows that are part of the *Idol* franchise. Presenting these two studies on exploitative TV back-to-back nicely shows how different analytical methods on similar data reveal complementary results. Jonathan Culpeper and Oliver Holmes draw on the idea of activity types (Levinson, 1992) and culturally rich points (Agar, 2006) in order to discuss occurrences of face-aggravating behaviour in a detailed manner in eight auditions drawn from a corpus of 40 transcribed shows. The authors are able to discover subtle differences in the ways the face-threatening acts are committed and accepted in the UK and US shows. Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, Patricia Bou Franch and Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich work with a quantitative analysis of 80 US and 80 UK audition sequences (2002–2009). They test the hypothesis that “impoliteness has *progressively* come to characterize ‘exploitative’ RTV” (p. 199, italics in original) by coding for impoliteness moves inspired by the taxonomy presented in Culpeper’s early work on impoliteness (e.g. 1996, 2005 rather than the more recent 2011). They discover both change and continuity in their sample. For example, ‘explicitly associating the other with a negative aspect’ is the strategy that increased most dramatically within the observed period, while many of the other impoliteness strategies are fairly equally distributed. They also observe a “more general trend in exploitative RTV whereby verbal wit and impoliteness go hand in hand in the strategic performance of celebrity expert personas” (p. 211), a factor which leads to ‘impolitainment’ (Lorenzo-Dus, 2009a). In Chapter 10, Blas Arroyo presents a “quantitative analysis of the production and reception of impoliteness in present-day Spanish reality television”. Like Shei (cf. the discussion of Chapter 3 above) he also focuses on a dating show. In his analysis of 25 clips from *Mujeres y hombres y viceversa*, he first looks at impoliteness production and reveals deeply ingrained sexist attitudes in the face-attacks that the contestants engage in (often in the form of counter moves). In a second step, 50 undergraduate viewers were asked to rate sequences from the show with respect to the level of impoliteness. This results in a nuanced discussion on the perception of impoliteness on different levels (e.g. differentiations between behaviour on TV and in non-public situations). In Chapter 11 Cynthia Gordon turns to another US show entitled *Honey We’re Killing the Kids*, which presents a family-health-makeover. With a discourse analytic lens and by drawing on Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis, she discusses how the candidates of the show are criticized about their lifestyle and are confronted with computer-generated pictures of themselves that show disfavorable

future identities as a means to question the parents' parenting style. Gordon shows how the show revolves around combining the frame of a health consultation with an intervention and explores how both are embedded within the RTV frame. The collection is concluded with a chapter by Andrew Tolson on "moments of truth: telling it how it is on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*". This chapter critically discusses the notion of class with respect to the guests invited to the UK show and explores how they are constructed as "trashy". Tolson shows how notions of gender and moral expectations are evoked when the guests are publicly made to undergo "ritual humiliation".

In addition to the many important insights on identity construction and face-aggravating behaviour, the collection is particularly valuable since it brings together scholars working on data from different countries. We learn about shows in Argentina, China, Israel, New Zealand, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States and about the ways in which language is used to manage identity and (im)politeness concerns in this TV genre/discourse. It is particularly fortunate that direct comparisons of the same shows that are broadcast in different countries and have been adapted to the norms of these countries are available. Furthermore, the collection is refreshing since there is no apologetic defense of why one should study this data. In line with other scholars who work on telecinematic discourse where the fictional element of the data is more dominant (see, e.g., the collections edited by Piazza et al., 2011; and Androutsopoulos, 2012; or scholars such as Bednarek, 2010), the contributors to the collection understand the data as naturally-occurring and as cultural artefacts worthy of being studied in their own right.

Overall, the collection convincingly offers insights into theories, methodologies and topics of relevance to the study of language use in reality TV shows from a discourse analytic perspective. This carefully edited work is highly recommended for scholars working in media linguistics and discourse analysis, especially those who work on identity construction, (im)politeness and genre.

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